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Letter dated 27 May 2012 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council

Further to my letter dated 25 May 2012 (S/2012/363), in which I updated the Security Council on the implementation of resolution 2043 (2012), I regret to inform that violence against the civilian population and clashes between Government forces and armed opposition groups in various parts of the Syrian Arab Republic have escalated in the past two days. The most disturbing and violent event took place in the El Houleh area in Homs province on 25 May 2012 and during the early hours of 26 May 2012.

Accounts of local residents suggest that attacks began on Friday, 25 May 2012, after demonstrations that followed prayers, and lasted until after midnight. Members of the Free Syrian Army and other local residents said that 116 people had been killed and more than 300 had been wounded.

On 26 May 2012, observers and civil and human rights experts from the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic (UNSMIS) visited the villages of Taldou and Kafr Laha in the El Houleh area, where they viewed the bodies of the dead and confirmed from an examination of ordnance that artillery and tank shells were fired at a residential neighbourhood. They heard first-hand accounts of local residents of what had happened. The villages in question have been outside of Government control, but have been surrounded by heavy military presence. Government officials said that seven security officers had been killed in the El Houleh area on 25 May 2012.

The patrols negotiated the cessation of fire with both sides to ensure their safety. At the checkpoint before the village of Taldou, the team observed two armoured personnel carriers and one tank. UNSMIS patrols were met by crowds of local residents. Despite the circumstances, the observers were positively received by the local population, the Free Syrian Army, the Revolutionary Council and the Local Coordination Committee. However, local residents were anxious about the departure of the observers, which they said would allow the Government forces to resume shelling. For these reasons, in Taldou three patrol members were temporarily prevented from leaving the town by residents. All local interlocutors called on UNSMIS to establish presence in the El Houleh area.

UNSMIS patrols observed 85 corpses, including 34 children and 7 women, located in a mosque in Taldou. The observers were not able to immediately determine the cause of death, but observed shotgun wounds and wounds consistent with artillery fire. Local residents said that the bodies of the dead were also located

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in another mosque, but the UNSMIS patrol could not visit it owing to security reasons. The patrol also saw artillery and tank shells, as well as fresh tank tracks. Many buildings had been destroyed by heavy weapons.

The observers visited the village of Taldou later the same day. They observed local residents preparing a mass grave to bury the dead. The UNSMIS team visited another mosque in the village where they were shown three bodies, including a woman and an infant with gunshot wounds, and another four bodies, with severe facial injuries in another mosque. UNSMIS observers secured the return of six to eight other corpses, including one woman and children, from the checkpoint of the Government forces to the Taldou village for burial. These bodies bore signs of severe physical abuse.

In the village of Kafr Laha, the military observers met with representatives of the Free Syrian Army, the Revolutionary Council and the Local Coordination Committee. The observers spoke with local residents who alleged that the armed men, who had entered the village, were members of a pro-government paramilitary group, "Shabiha", from the neighbouring village of Kabou. The observers were shown injured adults and children, but they could not verify when the injuries had been sustained.

UNSMIS contacted the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to request medical aid for the injured in the two villages. Representatives of the Red Crescent, however, responded that all ambulances were in the Homs neighbourhood of Sultaniyah, which had also been shelled overnight. Local UNSMIS patrols met with the Governor of Homs and shared photographic and video evidence. While the detailed circumstances are unknown, we can confirm that there has been artillery and mortar shelling. There have also been other forms of violence, including shootings at close range and severe physical abuse.

In the wake of these events, the United Nations observers are facing increasing criticism for not stopping the violence and, in some quarters, even being blamed for an increase of violence. There is a misconception, which is difficult to correct, about the role of unarmed military observers and what they can and cannot do. This puts the United Nations presence on the ground in a perilous position both with regard to the ability to conduct operations and to the observers' personal security.

These appalling and brutal crimes, which involved indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force, are flagrant violations of international law and of the commitments under the six-point plan to cease the use of heavy weapons in population centres and violence in all its forms. Such crimes require a transparent, independent and impartial international investigation. Those responsible for perpetrating these crimes must be held to account.

I firmly demand that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic immediately cease the use of heavy weapons in population centres and fulfil its responsibility to protect civilians. Armed violence in all its forms in the Syrian Arab Republic must cease at once. I urge the armed opposition to refrain from taking revenge and to keep its commitment not to resort to armed violence. However, I stress that it is in the first instance for the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to make the cessation of violence announced on 12 April 2012 a reality. It is also clear that a political process must be launched in order to find a solution to the current dangerous political stalemate.

I welcome the continued unanimous support of the Security Council for the efforts of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States for Syria. I urge the Council to redouble its support to the Joint Special Envoy and UNSMIS, find effective ways to ensure an immediate cessation of all armed violence and take further steps, as necessary, to create the conditions for the effective implementation of the Joint Special Envoy's six-point plan and the mandate of UNSMIS. In this regard, it is particularly critical that measures be in place to ensure that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic abides by its obligations to cease the use of heavy weapons in population centres. I call on the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to expeditiously and fully implement the other aspects of the six-point plan in order to create an environment for a political process to resolve the ongoing crisis through peaceful means and to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. The longer the current violence continues, the longer it will take the society to heal.

Joint Special Envoy Annan will travel to Damascus shortly. I sincerely hope that the Syrian leadership will take this opportunity to fundamentally change course and choose diplomacy over guns to ensure that the legitimate aspirations for freedom, dignity and prosperity of the Syrian people are met.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter urgently to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) **BAN** Ki-moon